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U.S. Can't Tell If Russia Cheats On Test Ban

President Reagan decided at a July 19 National Security Council meeting that he didn't want to resume talks with the Soviet Union and the British on a comprehensive nuclear testing ban. The talks were suspended in 1980.

Secret documents and intelligence sources disclose the appalling reason for the president's decision: U.S. experts do not at present have adequate means to catch the Soviets in violations of a test ban.

Eight years ago, the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to limit underground nuclear tests—the only kind permitted—to 150 kilotons, or roughly 10 times the size of the Hiroshima bomb. The Threshold Test Ban Treaty was never ratified by the United States, but the 150-kiloton limit was observed by both powers.

Then, in 1978, U.S. scientists, unsure of their measurement system, secretly changed their methods of calibrating a kiloton, in effect doubling the size of permitted test explosions.

When the Soviets subsequently doubled the size of their blasts, intelligence experts were alarmed; they

suspected a leak to the Kremlin at the highest levels.

Even with the new measuring method, the Soviets appear to have exceeded the 150-kiloton limit at least 11 times since 1978. One test—in September, 1980—was clocked at a likely size of 350 kilotons, according to my sources.

As recently as July 4, the Soviets set off a huge nuclear blast. It was estimated at a likely 260 kilotons, or at least 110 over the limit.

Reagan asked for the precise measurement of the Soviet explosion, so that he could lodge a vehement protest with the Kremlin. It was then that he learned such precision was impossible. A secret, highly technical Pentagon briefing disclosed that, in fact, the United States could not verify Soviet compliance with a test ban.

There was another, perhaps even more persuasive reason the president decided against a test ban treaty: U.S. scientists want to be able to test our nuclear weapons to make sure the stockpile is up to snuff.

A highly sensitive White House report shown to my associate Dale Van Atta states that the people in charge of U.S. nuclear weapons laboratories "insist that they must test up to approximately five kilotons in order to be able to verify performance of the weapons for stockpiling certification."

The report explains: "In the continued non-nuclear testing of weap-

ons components, it turns out with some regularity that individual components fail or degrade. Even acceptable components may become unavailable as manufacturers shift product lines or go out of business."

This means that new components or different materials have to be used, and the resulting weapon may not work. As the report states:

"Developing weapons remains to a considerable extent an art rather than a science. Weapons designs which seem appropriate, based on computer models, fail to work as predicted when actually tested." In short, a test-ban treaty would leave the United States doubly in the dark—about the reliability of our own nuclear weapons and about any violations by the Soviet Union.